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Reading the Fate of the Christ Child

New Masterpiece by Josefa de Ayala (1630-1684)

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Art & Antiques

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Publisher
Jaime Eguiguren

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Printing & Binding
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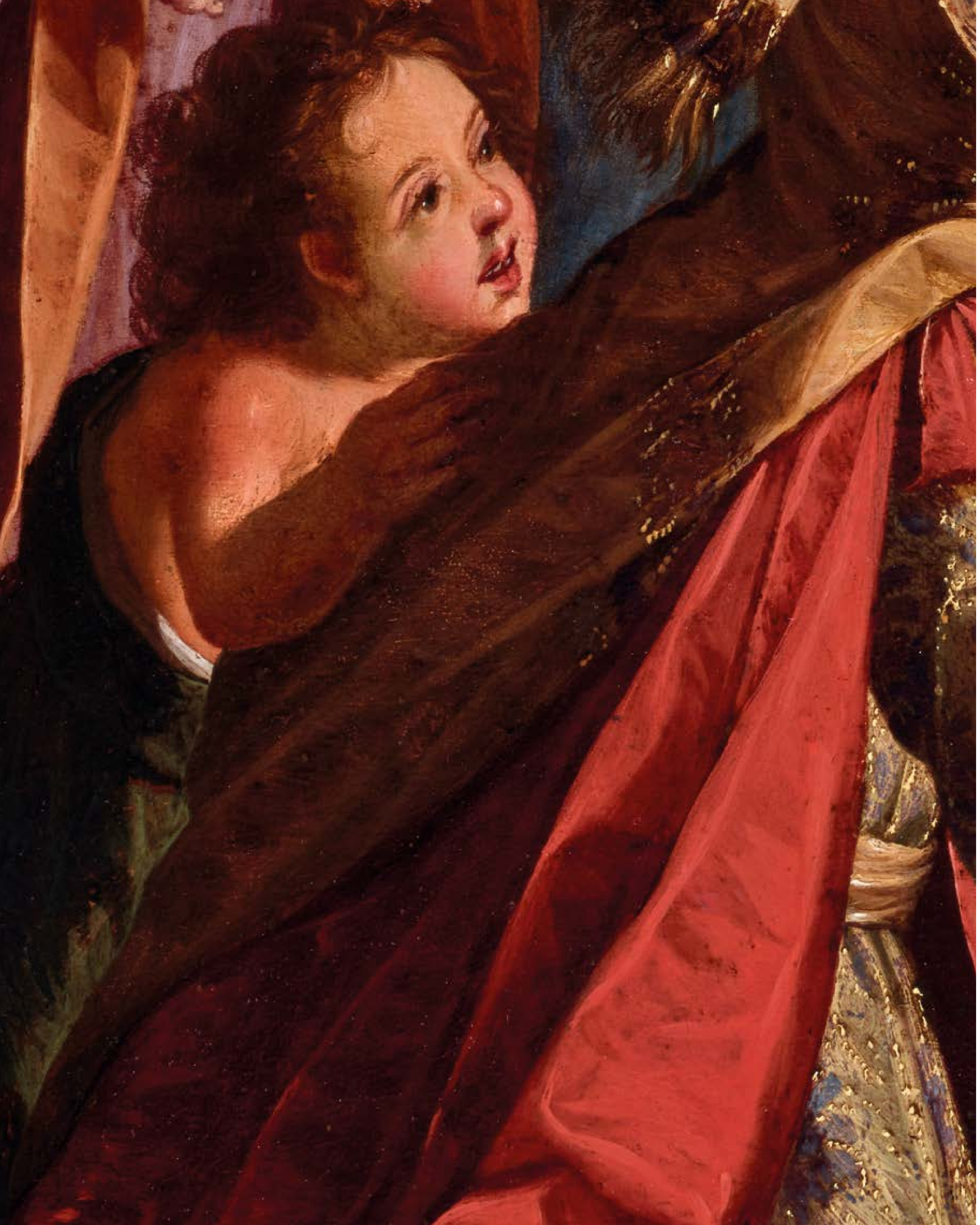
Acknowledgements
Direção Geral do Património Cultural
Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisboa, Portugal
Município de Óbidos
Ignacio Cano Rivero
João Cortez Lobão
Maria Cortez Lobão
Gonzalo Eguiguren Pazzi
Joaquim Horta Correia
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Adma Muhana
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ISBN: 978-84-09-14383-2

READING THE FATE OF THE CHRIST CHILD

NEW MASTERPIECE BY JOSEFA DE AYALA (1630-1684)

Joaquim Oliveira Caetano



FOREWORD

The discovery of the extraordinary painting *Reading the Fate of the Christ Child*, painted by Josefa de Ayala (1630-1684), also known as Josefa de Óbidos, is an important contribution not only to universal Baroque painting, but as one of the very few examples of works of art executed some centuries ago by a female artist. Josefa de Óbidos successfully infused this work with her enormous talent and inspiration, choosing a subject that was extremely unusual for the time, dressing the Virgin Mary in a gypsy hat, while a woman, also a gypsy, reads the Christ Child's palm. The scene is overflowing with unrivalled tenderness and warmth.

We can say without question that as early as the second half of the seventeenth century Josefa was a woman who trusted entirely in her own abilities and believed in herself. So much so that she decided to "emancipate" herself at a tender age. This legal status, akin to being a widow, was the only avenue open to a woman intending to enter business, sign contracts or carry out transactions without the surveillance of a man, whether he be her father, husband or guardian.

I would like to thank Dr. Joaquim Olivera Caetano for his cataloguing efforts, and for successfully contextualizing this beautiful work, expertly situating it, now and in the future, within the corpus of work that Josefa de Óbidos left us.

Jaime Eguiguren



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Josefa de Ayala
(Seville, 1630 – Óbidos, 1684)

Reading the Fate of the Christ Child
1667

Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques Gallery



Signed and dated: *Josepha..1667*

Oil on copper
Measurements: 23 x 29 cm
Provenance: German Private Collection
Exhibition: Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga,
Lisboa, September 2019.

Reading the Fate of the Christ Child: A New Masterpiece by Josefa de Ayala

Recently, several works by the Portuguese painter Josefa de Ayala (Seville 1630 - Óbidos 1684) have appeared at auctions in America and Europe, and a painting of hers arrived at the Louvre Museum. This confirms the growing interest around this artist, which is curious and unusual, considering the widespread lack of knowledge about Portuguese painting outside Portugal. In the history of Portuguese painting before the twentieth century, Josefa became the best-known artist internationally, partly because of the interest shown by the art market and perhaps to a greater extent because Josefa was a female painter and gender studies have developed enormously in recent years. In 1997, the *National Museum of Women in the Arts* in Washington dedicated an exhibition to her – *The Sacred and the Profane: Josefa de Óbidos of Portugal* – and in the last decade several academic theses have emerged, in Portugal, France and the United States, not always free from mystification.

This new phase of knowledge about the painter started in 1991, when Vitor Serrão curated a major exhibition on this artist,[1] followed by some other international exhibitions in which Josefa's presence was essential.[2] In 2015, the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon brought together most of her production in its last major exhibition on the painter.[3] However, strictly speaking, Josefa's feminine condition marked right from the beginning, for better or for worse, the attention of the critics on her work. A little over half a century after her death, a short biographical description of hers appeared in Damião Froes Perym's *Theatro Heroino*, a collection dedicated to the lives of famous Portuguese women published in Lisbon in 1736.[4]

Being famous for being a female artist did not always correspond, however, to effective recognition of her qualities as a painter. Josefa was an unusual case for several reasons. Firstly, for being a woman in a profession that was almost entirely male at the time. Then, for being a regional phenomenon, living in the small town of Óbidos, far away from the major artistic centers and also because, unlike most of her Portuguese peers, she had the habit of signing and dating many of her works, often stating her first name and the name of the land where she lived: "Josepha em Óbidos". Finally, because much of her paintings are easily recognizable for the themes – still lifes with cakes and fruit, the Mystic Lamb bordered by flowers, the Christ Child adorned with lace and pious jewelry. These motives and the affectionate manner in which she treated them were generally understood by the critics to stem from her femininity, mixed with an equal dose of provincialism. In 1949, when the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga hosted the first exhibition on Josefa,[5] Miguel Torga, one of the greatest Portuguese writers of the time, commented in his diary on May 30: "A visit to Josefa de Óbidos, who invites us to one of the rooms of the Museu das Janelas Verdes for a few days. What a great and painful disappointment! This lady makes lace with brushes. What a lack of imagination, such miserable drawings, nothing but a lump of trifle!" And he added "while an idiot was entranced in front of a plump baby Jesus who looked like an egg roll, I scratched myself. Oh! this Portuguese race that does not deliver a painter who is worth the while".[6] In 1971, Manuel Rio-Carvalho spoke again about "boys depicted like cakes" in the introduction to an exhibition held in Óbidos where the painter's work was shown along with works by contemporary artists.[7]

In one of the works exhibited, the painter António Areal visually translated the same idea into a "well-known portrait of Josefa d'Óbidos" in which he imagined her dressed as a nun, with coarse features and a rather lustful look. Such a figure seemed to express, in a somewhat anecdotal manner, the description known from the painter's *postmortem* inventory that defined her as "a single maiden who never married". Even for a more conservative viewpoint, such as that of Reynaldo dos Santos, at the time president of the Academia Nacional de Belas-Artes, the characteristics of Josefa's painting were construed more from the side of curiosity for being a woman artist "for the personality, so feminine, of her talent and soft charm in her palette",[8] rather than for true interest in her work "which is repeated, without much novel imagination (…) one would say that she was a nun who had never left the cloistered environment of Capeleira".[9]

Such a statement hardly stands in light of what we know today about the painter's work and life.

Born among painters

Josefa was the daughter of Baltasar Gomes Figueira (1604-1674). In 1624, when Portugal was under the rule of Philip IV of Spain (III of Portugal), Baltasar joined a Portuguese military contingent who set out to aid in the defense of Cadiz during the Anglo-Spanish War. A few years later, probably still as a military man, he settled in Seville and became acquainted with Ensign Juan de Ortiz de Ayala, a painting aficionado whose daughter, Catherine Camacho de Cabrera y Romero, he married at the end of 1629. Out of this most likely precipitated marriage, their first daughter, Josefa, was born in Seville. Her baptism godfather at the church of San Vicente on February 20, 1630, was the great painter Francisco de Herrera *el Viejo*, the greatest name of Sevillian painting of his time, with whom perhaps Baltasar was already being initiated in painting. In fact, in the baptismal record, Baltasar is no longer referred to as a military man, but as a painter, although he had not yet completed his apprenticeship. It was only in the following year, on June 13, after being examined and qualified as a painter by a jury composed of Miguel Guelles, Francisco Varela and Jacinto de Zamora, that he received the charter to work as a painter. He was described there as "a young man of good body with straight teeth and an age of twenty and seven years". His career as a painter must not have been very fortunate in the Andalusian city. In 1633 he was arrested for debt, and the following year new debts led to the intervention of a guarantor, the wealthy Portuguese merchant based in Seville, Simão da Fonseca e Pina. It was that same year, already with another daughter, Luisa, baptized urgently on February 20, 1632, in fear of her life, that Baltasar decided to return to Portugal with his wife and two children, settling in Peniche, where his parents and an influential brother, the merchant António Gomes Figueira, lived. His brother helped him achieve his first commissions to work for some local churches. This is where the third daughter, Basília, was born, baptized on June 24, 1635. In 1636, Josefa's family settled permanently in Óbidos, in a house on the Rua Nova, where the painter lived until his death.



Fig. 1 Josefa de Ayala,
Saint Catherine, 1646,
print on paper, 21.2 x 14.7 cm,
Private collection.

It was already in Óbidos that his two sons were born: José Ortiz, baptized on June 10, 1637, and António de Ayala, baptized on September 4, 1639. One last daughter, Antónia, was also born in Óbidos, where she was baptized on June 16, 1641. Both sons took religious vows: Jose Ortiz became a regular clergyman, and António, who was also a painter, professed in the Cistercian Monastery of Alcobaça. As to his daughters, Josefa and Luisa died single, little is known of Basília, who nevertheless inherited the painting materials after her father's death, and Antónia married the painter José Pereira da Costa.[10]

According to a seventeenth-century biographical note, Baltasar Gomes Figueira was renowned for his "*países*" (countries),[11] that is to say, landscape paintings. In addition to his learning, he brought from Seville two tools that helped him to impose himself in the Portuguese art milieu, despite living away from the major cities. He had a huge collection of prints, which both he and his daughter Josefa were to use abundantly and, above all, he developed the genre, hitherto unknown in Portugal, of still lifes, composed and illuminated in the Sevillian way in the tradition of Sánchez Cotán.

Josefa soon followed her father's footsteps. In 1644, Baltasar was commissioned to execute a great altarpiece at the church of the Augustinians in Coimbra, and in the following years, he also painted a canvas for the Jesuits and did some works for the University. Josefa accompanied her father and stayed at the Convent of Santa Ana. This is when her first works are known, an engraving of Saint Catherine (fig. 1), very mature for her 16 years of age, and a small vignette representing Saint Joseph. Later, in 1653, she made another engraving, an elegant figure of Wisdom to illustrate the publication of the new Statutes of the University of Coimbra in 1654. The payment was received by her father, a sign that Josefa was working in the family studio. The best-known works of Josefa de Ayala's first period of work are essentially small-sized paintings on copper, often more or less directly drawing from Baltasar Gomes Figueira's vast collection of engravings. The oldest ones known date from 1647 – a *Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine* (MNAA, inv. 147 Min), based on a painting by Titian engraved by Niccólò Boldini and later by Cornelis Cort, in the inverted version followed by Josefa, and a *Saint Francis and Saint Clare Worshiping the Christ Child in the Nativity*, which directly follows an intaglio by Pieter de Jode II on a painting by Gerard Seghers (private col.). Josefa was 16 or 17 years old at the time, but her paintings show her considerable skill using the oil technique.

For the next decade and a half, Josefa de Ayala's known works are exclusively small-format paintings, almost always made on copper, in which she proves mastery of light and detailed execution in the representation of objects and the textures of fabrics, with a precious miniaturist technique. The *Virgin and Child* of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, dated 1657 (fig. 2) is an example of the quality achieved by Josefa in these small works. The elegance of the color and the ostentatious representation of the jewels and fabrics give her painting a strong decorative imprint, combined with the idealized beauty of the models, expressing the pious, ever-present sweetness in her work.

One of the most interesting paintings from this period is a *Penitent Magdalene*, from the Museu Nacional Machado de Castro (Coimbra), where the Saint, with the instruments of penance, is defined by an "*alla candela*" lighting from a small focus, an oil lamp, that gives the figure a dramatic light with a beautiful tenebrist effect. On the back of the painting, a quick cursive reads "Mr. Baltazar Gomez Figueira / Coimbra / copper plates", a note stating the materials were purchased by Josefa's father. Nearing thirty years of age, Josefa continued to work at her father's workshop, performing small religious paintings and participating in the still-life business that made the Óbidos workshop famous. The Ayala family had built small models of fruit baskets, sweet trays, flower vases, representations of glass and pottery objects with which they composed panels by assorting such elements in varied manners, multiplying the compositional solutions. Josefa was to use them not only in still lifes but also in association with landscape representations or as ornaments in her religious paintings.



Fig. 2 Josefa de Ayala,
Virgin and Child, 1657,
oil on copper, 16.5 x 12.5 cm,
Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga,
inv. 116 Min.



Fig. 3 Josefa de Ayala,
Altarpiece of Saint Catherine, 1661,
Church of Santa Maria de Óbidos.

A fundamental change in the painter's career took place in 1661 when Josefa painted an altarpiece dedicated to Saint Catherine (fig. 3) for the church of Santa Maria de Óbidos, a set that remains in situ and integrated into the original carving. On the side panels, Josefa painted the episodes of *Saint Catherine's Dispute with the Doctors* and the *Destruction of the Martyrdom Machine* inspired by engravings by Wierix and a French anonymous author, and crowned the ensemble with a large panel showing the *Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine*, a subject she had already dealt with in small coppers, flanking it with two small canvases with the busts of Mary Magdalene and Saint Teresa of Avila. In this way, she assembled at the top the mystical wives of Christ, saints whom she often painted and for whom she seems to have had a very special devotion. Another aspect in which this set becomes important is that it demonstrates the painter's ability to move from small formats to larger canvases, while essentially maintaining her dramatic capability to render the treatment of light, the vividness of color and naturalism focused on objects. Nevertheless, the compositions, in which the figures almost fill the available space and become individualized on neutral backgrounds of clouds and cherubs, reveal the practice of a small-format painter, almost always averse to treat perspective. Already in 1696, the painter Félix da Costa Meesen noted that Josefa "did not understand perspective well, and diminished color".[12] With this set, Josefa entered a period of more than two decades in which she maintained a regular, and sometimes intense, activity as an altarpiece painter. Shortly after, she painted a large panel for the church of Columbeira, with Saints Justa and Rufina, patron saints of her native Seville, and three canvases for the arch of the church of São Brás da Dagorda. In 1664, she executed a panel with the Holy Family for the Convent of S. José do Buçaco; in 1672, she painted a large cycle on Saint Teresa of Ávila for the Carmelite Convent of Cascais and the following year she painted a vision of Saint John of the Cross for the Carmelite College of Figueiró dos Vinhos. For an unknown Cistercian convent, she painted a set of canvases that are now exhibited at the Machado de Castro National Museum in Coimbra; for the monastery of Cós, of the same order, a great *Last Judgment*; the large canvas of the *Adoration of the Shepherds* of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga for the convent of Santa Madalena de Alcobaça (1669); an altarpiece for the Jeronymite nuns at Vale Benfeito; an altarpiece on the Holy Family in Egypt (1574); a large panel of the *Virgin and Child with Saint Anthony*, today in the Museu do Patriarcado in Lisbon (1576); and, finally, the great altarpiece of the Misericórdia de Peniche (1679).

These and other scattered canvases document an intense activity as a painter of altarpieces, showing the fame that she had earned, especially in the municipalities closest to her homeland.

One of the immediate consequences of such activity was achieving autonomy: artistic autonomy from her father's workshop, but also civil and economic independence as a legally free person. Women in the seventeenth century were denied the possibility of having sufficient legal personality to sign notarial or commercial contracts, requiring the authorization of a guardian, the father or a brother. Widows were excepted, as they were entitled to manage their family assets. But other than widowhood, such a status could be achieved through "emancipation", by which fathers could authorize legal independence, in practice similar to that of a widow. Josefa's evolution from a still-life painter at her father's studio and a small-format artist who could sell directly to collectors to an artist dedicated to satisfying large altarpiece commissions requiring a notarial contract obliged her to achieve such a status, appearing in the documents as an "emancipated maiden". We do not know the exact date when this change took place, but it was certainly in the early 1660s, not only because it is from there on that she progressed as an altarpiece painter, but also because, taking advantage of the opportunity provided by her new legal status, Josefa started to engage in an intense activity purchasing freehold and leased land, money-lending for interest, and acquiring property and debt with which she soon made a considerable fortune. At a time of very high inflation due to the Peninsular War that followed the restoration of Portugal's Independence in 1640, and the economic difficulties of the general population, especially of the peasants, the painter engaged in speculative activities similarly to other relatives of hers. Very high-interest loans made it possible for them to get rich quickly, and Josefa soon became the owner of farmland, mills, and a large house on Rua Direita in Óbidos, opposite the church of São Pedro, where she moved in with her servants and later with her orphaned nieces. The 1660s were, moreover, the times when the household of Baltasar Gomes Figueira broke apart. One of Josefa's sisters, Antónia, married in 1659 to the painter Jose Pereira da Costa; another sister, Basília, went to live to Cadaval after marrying Manuel Borges da Costa. The brothers, José Ortiz and António de Ayala, took religious vows also in this period, and finally, Luisa, the always sick sister with whom Josefa had a close bond since childhood, died on the first day of 1664. Josefa went on with her family, at home, in a process of autonomous household intertwined with her increasing artistic independence. And if, until the mid-1670s, her business as a painter and a financial speculator was intense, she seemed to slow down a little as time went by, maybe because of her age, and certainly because she had already made a considerable fortune, and perhaps also because of her father's death in 1674. From then on, Josefa's painting seems to have turned again to smaller formats painted on copper, and to the still-life models (the only ones dated and signed by her belong to the 1670s, after Baltasar's death) and, above all, to the creation of standard images of the Christ Child, the Infant Saint John the Baptist, and the Mystic Lamb, whose figures are profusely decorated and surrounded by complicated cartouches or wreathed in flowers.

Throughout this period, Josefa adopted a more independent style, following less, or at least more inventively, the engravings which she never ceased to use. Her colors became less tenebrist, more open, with a luminosity that acknowledges the work of Zurbarán and, although she still had some difficulty in composing depth and representing the human body, she became increasingly accurate in naturalistic detail, more delighted in the representation of fabric and more convincing in the compositions in which the figures seem to fill the canvas completely. Looking at these works, Cirillo Wolkmar Machado (1922: 63), who was almost always accurate in his appraisals, saw in her miniaturist work "certain adornments with the patience of the Gothics", easily admitting that her altarpieces "were to be held among the best of that time".[13]

Two beautiful paintings on copper recently appeared on the art market, *Saint Mary Magdalene comforted by Angels*, purchased for the Louvre Museum and the *Holy Family with Saint John the Baptist* acquired by the Museu da Santa Casa da Misericórdia in Oporto, dating from 1679. They are meticulous masterpieces by Josefa, with an engaging treatment of light and the elegance of color of an artist who had peaked her skill.



Nevertheless, the works that best characterize her final years are the depictions of *Agnus Dei* and the Christ Child dressed in lace or dressed as a pilgrim, accompanied by the symbols of the Passion, sometimes presented as images surrounded by drapery, or inscribed in carefully painted cartouches or flower wreaths (fig. 4). Such kind of imagery was sometimes the object of mistrust on the part of the ecclesiastical authorities, because of the profane character they involved, as Vitor Serrão showed by recalling an excerpt from the Synodal Constitutions of Évora of 1633, which forbade any images of the Christ Child "dressed in unholy attire", portrayed as soldiers, dressed as pilgrims or "amorini" with their indecent insignia[14]. Despite raising doubts among some clerics, there certainly was a market for them. Josefa painted them repeatedly until the end of her life (there is one dated in 1684, the year she died).

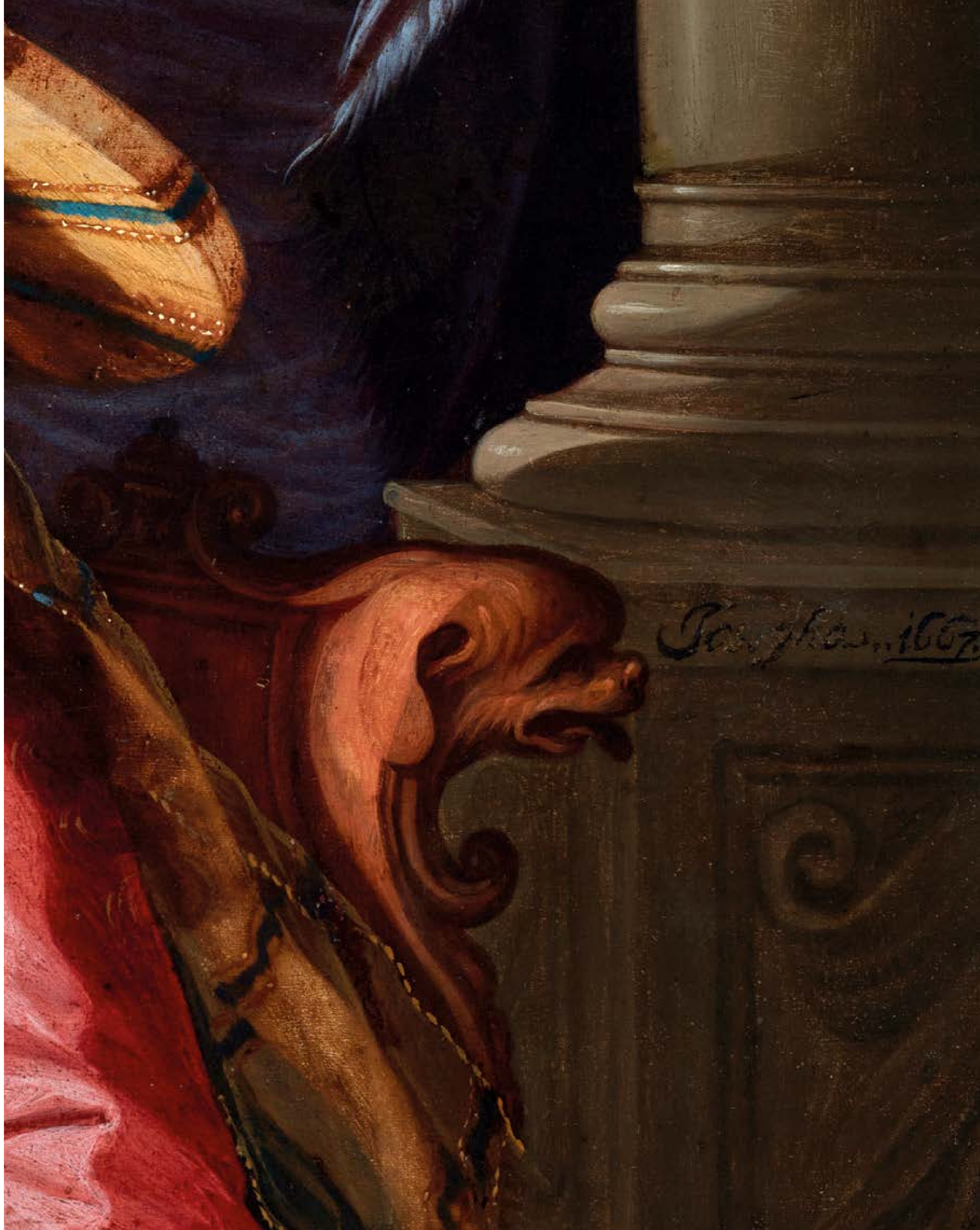
Fig. 4 Josefa de Ayala, *Christ Child Pilgrim*, 1676, oil on canvas, 106 x 81 cm, Private collection.

The production of such images was certainly one of the reasons for understanding that Josefa's painting as one of "feminine" sweetness, often verging kitsch in its syrupy, almost anecdotal sentimentalism. It is perhaps a mistake, however, to view it essentially as the transposition of a simple, affectionate and somewhat provincial piety, made to please a more sanctimonious and naive clientele than a truly cultivated one. First, it must be said that this excessive "sweetness" that Josefa is sometimes accused of is far from being a typical feature of female painters. Great contemporary painters of hers such as Carlo Dolci or Murillo were often criticized for the same limitations attributed to Josefa, that is, for the creation of images of an idealized beauty intended for an audience more devoted to religion than to art. However, Joseph Imorde[15] has shown convincingly how the aesthetics of "sweetness" was deliberately sought by Dolci within the awareness that it embodied the essence of the Divine Spirit, an argument that is not difficult to transpose into Josefa de Ayala's work. Barbara von Barghahn[16] emphasized the concept of "Dulcedo Dei",[17] that is, meditation on "sweetness" as one of the characteristics of that which is divine, as present in Saint Bonaventure, Saint Augustine and Saint Bernard, and which was revitalized in the seventeenth century, influenced by the texts of Saint Teresa.

In fact many of the images produced by Josefa de Óbidos in the final stages of her life may be understood as direct repetitions of images mentioned in the writings of Saint Teresa and which are a part of her iconography. These are not only the Christ Child, but also Christ with the Holy Wounds in the Bank of Portugal collection as well as several panels representing Saint Joseph and the Holy Family. In one of the earliest biographical texts on the painter, Froes Perym wrote, in the work already quoted, that "the greater part of the day and night, Dona Josefa spent learning from books, being most inclined especially to spiritual and devout works" (p. 494-495), an observation that may nowadays be taken as more than just a commonplace. Raised within a family of several friars and priests, Josefa seems to have shared with them a sound spiritual culture, essentially marked by the spirituality of Saint Teresa, a figure whom she might not only have been

interested in for her religious side but also for her defense of female work as she postulated in order to sustain the independence of her convents, an aspect to which Josefa could not be indifferent. It was certainly no coincidence that the most distant points from the town where she lived and worked – Buçaco, Figueiró dos Vinhos and Cascais – were precisely Carmelite Convents, revealing the great interest of this religious order in her work, certainly due to the spiritual communion between the teachings of Carmel and the painter from Óbidos.

Josefa was the most important Portuguese female painter before Modernity, but her painting goes far beyond being a curious case of "gendered art". Rooted in her father's teachings, though having developed a professional practice that she embraced very early on, with the protection of her family and working in a relatively confined space where she had the help of this family network, Josefa painted and lived her life with unusual independence, and truly created her own artistic language in Portuguese Baroque.







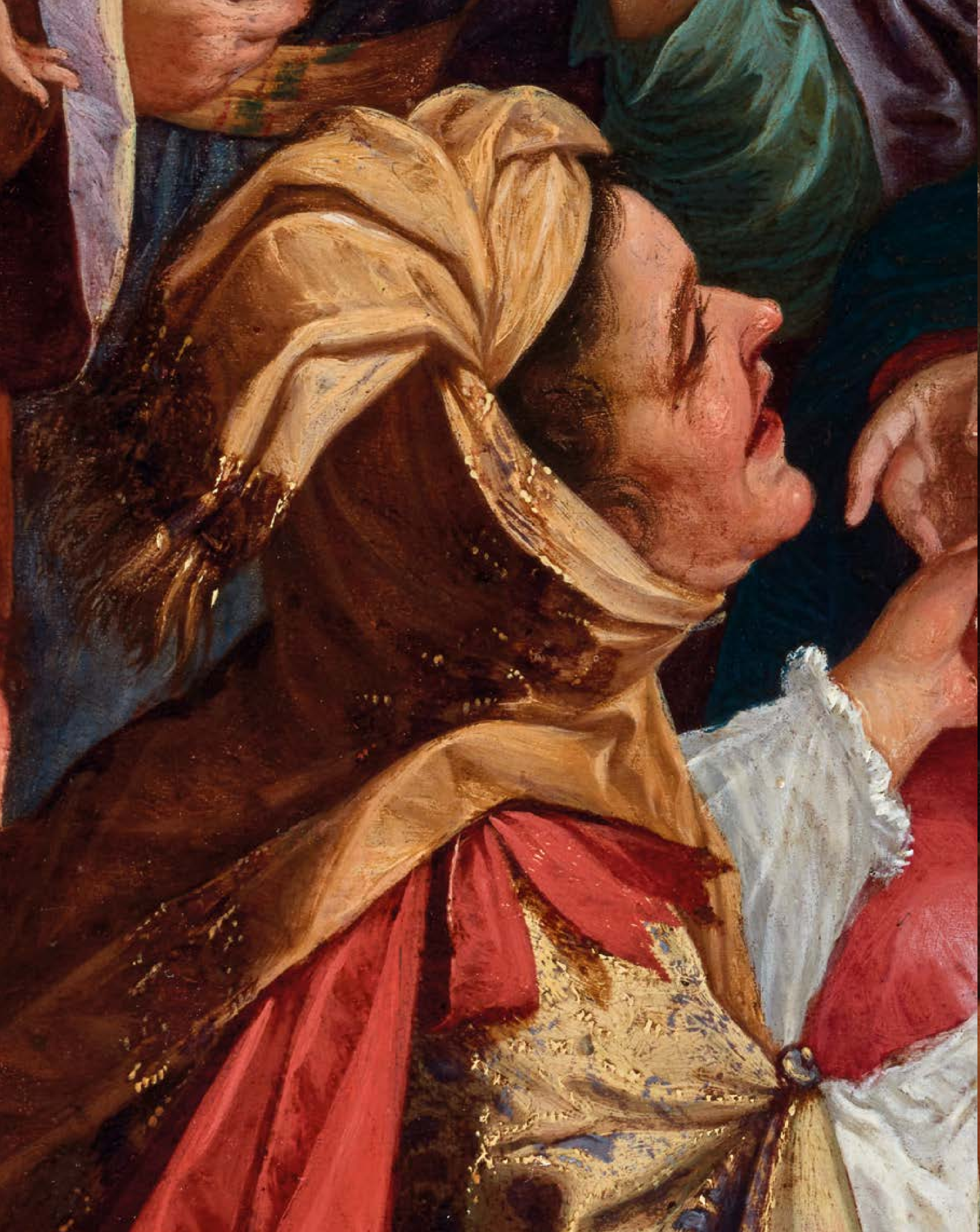
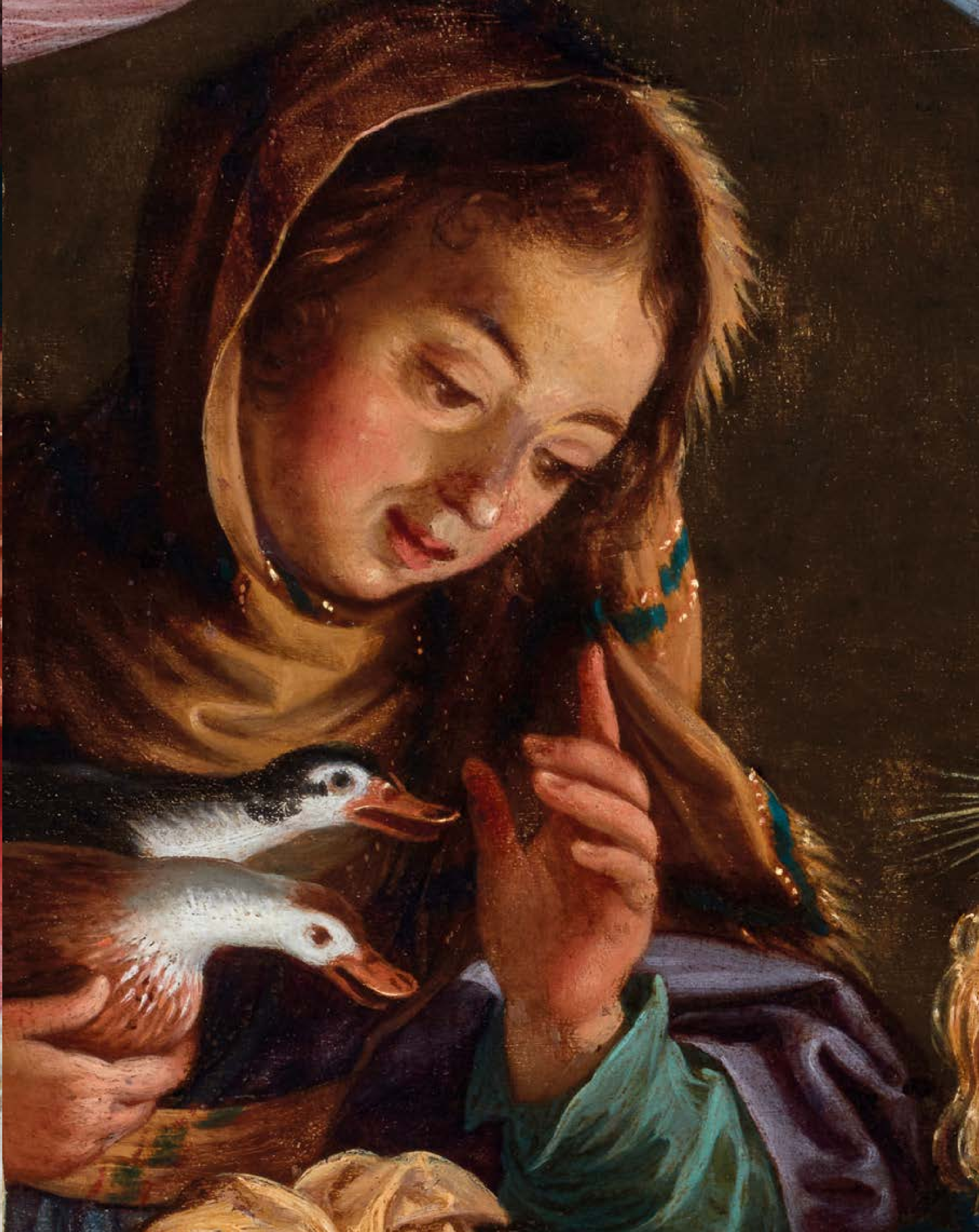





Fig. 5 Josefa de Ayala, *Reading the Fate of the Christ Child* (detail), 1667, oil on copper, 23 x 29 cm, Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques Gallery.

A new painting by Josefa and a rare theme

When Josefa de Ayala's delicate oil on copper appeared on the market in May this year (Auktionshaus Plückbaum, *Auktion 342, 31 May und 1 Juni 2019*, lot 1135) with the theme *Reading the Fate of the Christ Child* when the Holy Family was in Egypt, this painting was totally unknown to the critics. Signed "Josepha", on the base of column on the right side of the painting, and dated 1667, the work has her color, forms and characteristic human models and easily relates to other paintings by Josefa de Ayala from the late 1660s, taking up details and ornaments that are to be found in other works of hers.

Josefa positions the group of figures on a dark background, only marked by the column on the right and by a folded, purple drapery that hangs behind the Virgin. This lack of depth of space is very common in Josefa and was a strategy she often used to overcome her difficulty to use perspective and, above all, to increase the proximity of the figures, which almost always appear filling the composition. Stiff, pleated draperies also often appear in her work, sometimes in the foreground, opening the scene as if they were the backdrop of a theater from which the composition is seen. This applies to one of her first oils on copper, the *Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine* at the Museu Nacional Soares dos Reis, in Oporto, dating from 1647; and to the various versions she painted of Salome Presenting the Head of Saint John the Baptist (Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga and private collections); and the *Ecce Homo* from the Banco de Portugal collection. Other times, as in this painting, and in the canvas at the Convent of Buçaco and in the *Virgin, the Child and Saint Anthony* of the Museu do Patriarcado in Lisbon, 1676, among others, the curtain appears in the background, in one of the upper corners, partially cutting the composition.

In addition to being a decorative element, the column is a strong iconographic element as a Christological symbol and as an image of faith. Josefa uses it, for example, in the *Annunciation* of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, a theme where this element is common, but also as an image of faith in the *Lactation of Saint Bernard*, 1670, in a private collection in Paris (fig. 6); and in *Saint Bernard with the Instruments of the Passion of Christ*, from the Joaquim Horta Correia collection. It appears in these last paintings associated with the curled drapery, as it appears in the *Reading the Fate of the Christ Child*, and also in the *Holy Family* of the parish church of Cascais and in the *Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine*, at the Church of Santa Maria de Óbidos, 1661 (fig. 7).

In the foreground of the painting, Josefa placed a wooden table with baroque carved mascarons, whose design is similar to that of the chair where the Virgin sits. It is a type of decoration, inspired by Flemish models, which the painter particularly appreciated and often used in the complicated cartouches that sometimes surround her *Agnus Dei*, such as those at the Évora Museum and at the Church of the Congregated in Braga. On the table, she placed a fruit basket with melon, apples, grapevines and flowers, worked in detail. In addition to the Marian symbology and the association with the abundance and prosperity of fortune, the ensemble demonstrates Josefa's ability as a still-life painter, a genre that made her father's workshop famous and which she often practiced herself, with her father and on her own. A "melon fruit bowl" was listed in the post-mortem inventory of painter Baltasar Gomes Figueira, and in a series of paintings from 1668 symbolizing the months of the year, nowadays scattered, probably a collaboration between the painter and his daughter, a melon appears in the foreground among the elements that identify the month of July.

A Portuguese poet from Josefa's time, Soror Maria do Céu (1658-1753), wrote a curious group of poems entitled "*Significações das Flores Moralizadas*" (The Meanings of Moralized Flowers), which included a series of poetic meditations on the meaning of the fruits and, earlier on, Friar Isidoro Barreira had published "*Tratado das Significações das Plantas, Flores e Fructos*" (A Treatise on the Meanings of Plants, Flowers and Fruit) (Lisbon: Pedro Craesbeck, 1622), which became an extremely popular work throughout the seventeenth century. In both works, the apple appears obviously linked to the Paradise Lost, and its presence in the painting is explained by the understanding of Mary as the New Eve, conceived without sin and destined to redeem humanity from the faults of the primitive Eve.



Fig. 6 Josefa de Ayala,
Saint Bernard with the
Instruments of the Passion,
c. 1665, oil on copper,
19.8 x 14.7 cm,
Joaquim Horta Correia Collection.



Fig. 7 Josefa de Ayala,
Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine,
1661, oil on canvas,
Church of Santa Maria de Óbidos.

As for the melon, Soror Maria do Céu sees in it a symbol of wisdom: "*He grave o Melão sabedoria, / Pelas letras que cria, / He doce, se se apura, / que não há ser discreto sem doçura*"(The melon is heavy in wisdom, / for the letters it creates, / it is sweet, if cleared, / that it will not be discreet without sweetness).[18]

The composition of the fruit bowl, with an open light projected onto the texture of the fruit, is a very common arrangement of the elements in Josefa's still lifes, admittedly talented in painting "inanimate things" as the ancient critics noted. Her "naturalism" is, above all, a naturalism of objects and natural elements, much more than of the human figure, almost always stereotyped in the pursuit of an immaterial and sacralized beauty, and is manifested, as this painting demonstrates, particularly in fabrics and jewelry, which she paints with obvious pleasure and skill. Josefa had a personal taste for clothes, rich fabrics and ornaments. The inventory of her possessions, made after her death in 1684, is full of embroidered ornaments, velvet and oriental silk clothing, lace, gloves, silver and gold embroidery, and a wealth of jewelry.[19] In addition to the wealthness that these garments and fashion ornaments document, they also show a clear personal taste that is also reflected in her reproduction of the textile diversity and the profusion of decorative ornaments she represented in her paintings. The richness of color of the clothes, the lace, the bands, the blankets and the hats in this painting are an excellent example of the painter's fascination with lush garments, with which she renders an evident decorative sense to her paintings.

The composition of the figures is, as far as we know, original, as is the theme of which we do not know of any other version in Josefa's painting, though some isolated characters and certain relationships established between the figures have a parallel in another work by this artist. The position of the Christ Child and the relationship He establishes with the Virgin, tenderly placing His hand on His mother's breast, recalls the composition of the *Holy Family* of the Sassetti Paes collection and, very directly, *Saint Joseph with the Christ Child* in a private collection (fig. 8). The model of the child behind the Gypsy that reads the fate is very reminiscent of the Christ Child of the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* that Josefa painted following engravings from Barocci's famous painting (private col., Cat. 3 of the 2015 exhibition), the Infant Saint John the Baptist of the *Virgin with the Christ Child, Saint John and an Angel*, a oil on copper from around 1660 in a private collection (cat. 13 of the 2015 exhibition) and the Christ Child of the *Holy Family with Saint Anthony* of the Museu do Patriarcado in Lisbon.



Fig. 8 Josefa de Ayala,
Saint Joseph with the Christ Child,
1667, oil on copper,
13 x 11 cm,
Lisbon, Private collection.



Fig. 9 Josefa de Ayala,
Adoration of the Shepherds,
1669, oil on canvas,
150 x 164 cm,
Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga
invº 128 pint.

The most evident relationship between the figures in this painting and those in Josefa's other paintings is, however, that of the woman who carries a pair of ducks in her arms and can be directly confronted with the female figure of the *Adoration of the Shepherds* at the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (inv. 128 Pint), originally from the Convent of Santa Maria Madalena in Alcobaça (fig. 9). Although in this painting the woman of the ducks holds a basket on her head, it is evident that the model of both figures is the same, by the facial features, the woman's position, the identical clothes and even the position and plumage of the ducks. The dates of the two works are very close indeed, 1667 for the painting we are dealing with, 1669 for the one in the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga. As is common in Josefa de Ayala's work, the beautiful painting of the *Reading of the Fate of the Christ Child* is built on a gathering of models, ornaments and figures, constantly adopted by the painter in her work.

Another interesting element of the painting is the curious headdress worn by both the Virgin and the woman holding a child on the opposite side of the painting. It is in the shape of a board, flat disc, lined with bands of fabric, which was popularized in the Iberian Peninsula by the paintings of Luis de Morales. This unusual ornament was directly linked to the Gypsy dress, a people whose name identified them with Egypt, and therefore, the hat portrays the presence of the Holy Family exiled in Egypt. The identification of this model of Virgins by Morales as “Gypsy Virgins” (fig. 10) is documented in both commissions of that time and the description of these paintings in collection inventories. Bishop Juan de Ribera commissioned from Morales in 1567 two images of the “Virgin dressed as a Gypsy”,[20] and an inventory of goods from the same bishop of 1611 lists a “*quadro al olio de nuestra señora bestida de xitana com el ninyo en braços*” (Oil painting of Our Lady dressed as a Gypsy with the Child in Her arms)”.[21] The theme was hugely popular, as seen from the multiple versions by Morales and his followers that still exist in various collections.[22]

The identification of Gypsy or Egyptian women with this headdress, which was called “bernó” was quite popular. In François Desprez’s *Recueil de la diversité des habits…,* published in Paris by Richard Bretón in 1562, the figure representing the Egyptian woman is presented wearing one of these typical hats. Ana Ávila[23] drew attention to what she considers to be the first representation of a Gypsy in Spanish visual culture, two years after Desprez’s engraving – a small woodcut inserted on the frontispiece of the *Comedia llamada Aurelia* by Juan de Timoneda, edited in Valencia by Juan de Mey in 1564 (Biblioteca Nacional de España, R / 2165, fl. 63), in which the figure representing the Gypsy character is also identified by the “bernó”. Earlier, however, as in *Christ on the Way to Calvary*, by Jerome Bosch, in the Vienna Academy, or in the triptych of the *Worship of the Golden Calf* by Lucas van Leyden, in the Rijksmuseum, circa 1530, similar hats appear in male and female characters for the purpose of marking the exoticism of the types represented and locating the scene on a specific context.



Fig. 10 Luís de Morales, *Virgin in Gypsy Dress,* Private Collection.







Recently, Romero Dorado, regarding a painting from the Casa Medina Sidonia Foundation collection, has brought forward a proposal that seems to link the topic of the Gypsy Virgins directly to Portugal. It is a small painting on canvas (50 x 33 cm) depicting a *Virgin with the Child* (fig. 11) wearing the peculiar round flat hat, lined with red silk and decorated with a dark green stripe, which the historian associates to a portrait, now lost, that António de Holanda made of Empress Isabel of Portugal which is mentioned in a letter that his son, the painter and treatise writer Francisco de Holanda wrote in 1572 to Philip II and of which the painting of the Medina Sidónia family could be, perhaps, an old replica.[24]

The clue proposed by Romero Dorado may indeed be followed in the Portuguese visual culture. António de Holanda was a Flemish illuminator, probably trained by Simon Bening, who settled in Portugal in the early second decade of the sixteenth century, and lived there, working for the court, until his death before 1571.[25] His son, Francisco de Holanda, born in Lisbon in 1517 or 1518, traveled to Rome where he became acquainted, among others, with Michelangelo and is the author of one of the most interesting sixteenth-century treatises on painting, *Da Pintura Antigua*, which he completed in 1548.[26] He wrote other treatises on portrait, drawing and urbanism, in addition to two large illuminated albums, one about his trip to Rome – *Album das Antigualhas* (Album of Antiques) and another to which he devoted much of his life, entitled Images of the Ages of the World (*Aetatibus Mundi Imagines*), a great visual narration of Christian history with complicated and erudite relationships between images.[27] In it, Francisco demonstrates great concern for the historical and theological match between the images represented, their historical timing and geographic scope and the religious implications of the most subtle details. And this is precisely what makes him use over and over again the iconography of this hat on the figure of the Virgin as to demonstrate the location of the scene. In fol. LXXVIII (fig. 12), which represents the *Flight into Egypt*, the Virgin rides a donkey and is followed by Saint Joseph and a woman carrying a basket on her head. She holds the Child in her arms and is covered with the disc-shaped hat we have been referring to. On the base, in two *tondi*, Francisco de Holanda represents the *Rest in the Flight* and the *Fall of the Idols* when the Christ Child passes by. In both representations, the Virgin wears the same "bernó". In folio LXXX, which shows the *Return of the Holy Family to Nazareth* (fig. 13), Holanda draws the same figures, now in procession on foot, with an older Christ Child walking and holding His Mother's hand, and the Virgin wears the same characteristic hat. There is no doubt, therefore, that the painter used the iconographic motif of the hat as a direct and explicit link to identify the scenes in Egypt.

Fig. 11 Based on António de Holanda,
Virgin in Gypsy Dress, 1529
oil on canvas,
Fundación Casa Medina Sidonia
Collection.

Fig. 12 Francisco de Holanda,
Flight into Egyp,
Plate LXXVII of De Aetatibus Mundi
Imagines, Madrid, Biblioteca
Nacional de España, DIB/14/26.

Fig. 13 Francisco de Holanda,
Return from Egyp,
Plate LXXX from De Aetatibus Mundi
Imagines, Madrid, Biblioteca
Nacional de España, DIB/14/26.



When Francisco de Holanda drew these figures, his main sponsor at the Portuguese court was Infante D. Luís, brother of King D. João III. This is why the volume of Images of the Ages of the World passed into the possession of his bastard son, D. António Prior do Crato, who would later become the defeated Suitor (against Philip II of Spain) to the crown of Portugal when it became vacant after the death of Cardinal D. Henrique, who had succeeded his nephew, D. Sebastião, killed in 1578 at the military disaster of Alcácer-Quibir. It is precisely

Fig. 14 Diogo de Teixeira,
Rest in the Flight into Egypt, c. 1580,
oil on wood, 300 x 250 cm.
Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga,
invº 702 Pint.

in the work of Diogo Teixeira (1545-1612), a painter who was a knight at the household of D. António, and who would most likely have known Francisco de Holanda and this album,[28] that we often find these hats in scenes related to the presence of the Holy Family in Egypt. In one of his best representations, a drawing at the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, as well as in a large panel 3 meters high by 2.5 wide, unfortunately pending restoration, Diogo Teixeira represented the necessary exoticism of the location by using, as Holland did, palm trees as an element to identify the landscape, and placed the Virgin with the Child at the center, surrounded by other women and children. Four of the female figures wear the curious disc-shaped hats that were associated with the Egyptian and Gypsy attire (fig. 14). As in Josefa's panel, the fruit baskets, in addition to completing the symbolic picture, document the generosity of this foreign land towards the Holy Family. Just as Christ had come to redeem mankind, and the Virgin New-Eve would redeem the fault of the first woman, so Egypt's kindness to the exiled family rescued the Egyptian nation from Pharaoh's persecution against the Hebrew people, reconciling Egypt with God and enabling the dissemination of Christ's message to the whole Earth.

It may not be irrelevant to recall that one of the painters trained in Diogo Teixeira's workshop, Belchior de Matos, documented since 1595 and deceased in 1628[29], was precisely the most important painter to live and work in the region of Óbidos in the generation prior to the arrival of Josefa's father to that town after his apprenticeship in Seville.

Whether it was from the Spanish tradition, through the widespread images of Morales, or from Portuguese folk memory, Josefa knew well the custom that linked Egypt to the Gypsy people and the use of this characteristic hat by their womenfolk. In an altarpiece that her father painted, circa 1645, for the Chapel of Saint Brás in Bombarral, there is a small painting of the *Rest in the Flight into Egypt*, with a group of five women offering fruits to the Virgin and Child, two of them wearing these picturesque hats. In another painting by Baltasar Gomes Figueira, a large canvas from the *Rest in the Flight to Egypt* taking up Barocci's model, painted in 1643 for the Church of Saint Brás da Dagorda, Óbidos, there is a secondary scene in which the Holy Family is moving away after resting, accompanied by a group of three women wearing the same hats (fig. 14). The iconographic model was therefore known and used in Josefa's father's workshop where she trained and painted.

A less usual theme than this depiction is the reading of the fate in the lines of the palm of the Christ Child, performed by a Gypsy woman while the Family rested during the flight into Egypt, which at a first glance seems to hold a certain profane dimension. We do not know of any visual precedents for this representation, which certainly exist or existed, but the narrative that gave rise to it was not uncommon in Iberian and Portuguese literary culture in Josefa de Ayala's time.

Once again, we come across possible influences of Carmelite spirituality in Josefa's work. Indeed, one of the first authors in whom we find the relevance of the Gypsy theme around the Holy Family during their stay in Egypt is an important and prolific Carmelite writer, Fr José de Jesús María (1562-1629). In his *Historia de La Virgen Maria Nuestra Señora Com declaracion de algunas de sus Excellencias* (History of the Virgin Mary Our Lady with the Declaration of some of Her Excellences), published in Antwerp by Francisco Canísio in 1652, he describes how the Virgin and the Child were surrounded by "*las Egypcias enamoradas de la amable forastera y de su hyjo, le van a tener muchos ratos companhia, llevandole sus dones, y goçando atentas de su conversación tan de cielo, com que juntamente las aficiona y alumbra*" (the Egyptians, enamored by the lovely foreigner and Her Son, spend much time with Them, bringing gifts and listening to Their heavenly talk, with which they become affectionately enlightened) (p. 655). This Carmelite presents the Virgin grateful for the company of the Gypsies, and the work of the Jesuit Antonio de Escobar y Mendonza (1589-1669), *Historia de la Virgen Madre de Dios María* (History of the Virgin Mother of God Mary), published in 1618, is much more specific. Several editions were published throughout the century and also in the next century, and this long epic poem came to be called *Nueva Gerusalem. Maria*. In 1662, just five years before Josefa de Ayala's painting, one such edition was published in Lisbon by the printer Domingos Carneiro. Between folios 230 and 232, the long poem describes the visit of a "pious Gypsy" to the exiled Virgin, who asks for the "white and pure" hand of the Christ Child, so that "in the strange lines" she may read "what Glories the heavens will assure Thee". And by reading the lines of the palm, the Gypsy predicts in the following stanzas the destiny of Passion and Redemption in the future life of Jesus.

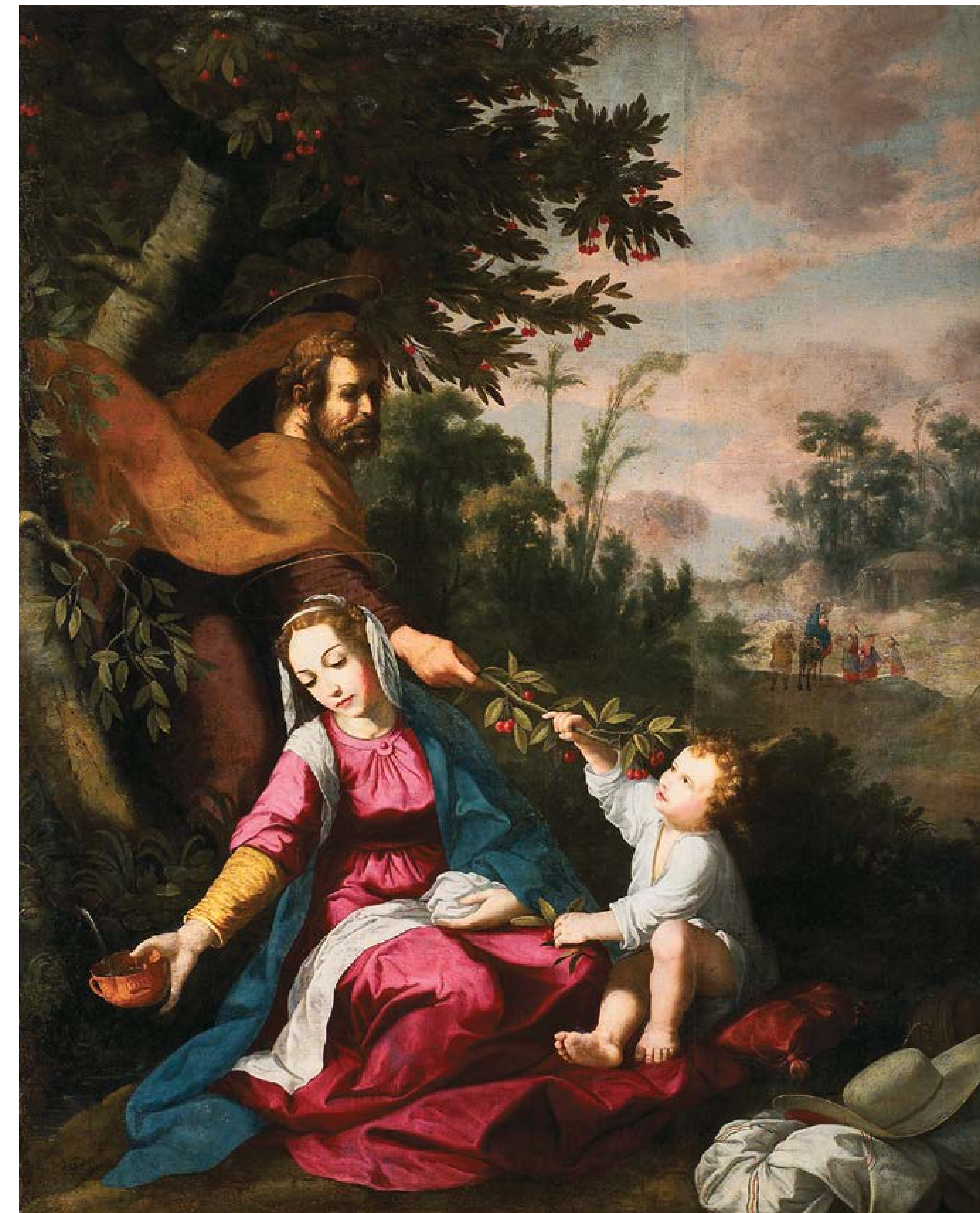


Fig. 15 Baltasar Gomes Figueira, *Rest in the Flight into Egypt* (detail), 1643, oil on canvas, Church of Saint Brás, Dagorda, Óbidos.



Fig. 16 Baltasar Gomes Figueira & Josefa de Óbidos, *The Month of April*, oil on canvas, 1668, 110.5 x 175 cm, Private collection.

The subject of the Gypsy reading Jesus' fate had already appeared in Portuguese literature, apparently having some success though limited to feminine and nuns' poetry. Soror Maria de Mesquita Pimentel, born in Évora in 1586 and died in 1663 in the same city, was a Cistercian nun at the Convent of Saint Bento de Cástris. She wrote a long religious poem entitled "*Memorial da Infância de Christo e Triumpho do Divino Amor*" (Memorial of the Childhood of Christ and Triumph of the Divine Love), whose first part, dedicated to the Virgin of Our Lady of Exile, was published in 1639 in Lisbon by the printer Jorge Rodrigues. In the eighth song (folios 112vº et seq.), in octaves with a flavor of Camões, Soror Maria Pimentel introduces the theme of the Massacre of the Innocents in 12 stanzas (63 to 75) dedicated to the reading of the fate of the Child by a Gypsy in Egypt. She begins by describing the group of Gypsies who rushed to see the "ancient, yet so young" beauty of Jesus, vying among themselves for the honor of divining His future, assigned to the wisest of them. Then follows the glorious fate of the "so joyful" Child with repeated interjections about His extreme beauty. In one of the stanzas, no. 70, the Gypsy calls Jesus "Easter of Flowers", exactly the same expression that Baltasar Gomes Figueira and Josefa used, in 1668, in the couplet that they composed under the representation of the month of April, in one of the panels of the series of months painted at the workshop in Óbidos (fig. 15).[30]

Another poet from Josefa's time, Soror Violante do Céu, an influential nun at the Dominican Convent of A Rosa in Lisbon,[31] also called Baby Jesus "*cara de Pascoa Florida*" (Face of Easter of Flowers) in a *vilhancico* (carol) she wrote devoted precisely "*Al niño Jesus, buena dicha de una Gitana, que le canta*" (to the boy Jesus, good luck from a Gypsy, who sings for Him), that is, the theme Josefa visually transcribes in this painting. After praising the boy, "eternal King of Heaven", the Gypsy in Soror Violante do Céu's carol asks Him permission to read His palm "*Permitid, niño del cielo, / Que esta humilde Gitanilla, / Para tener dicha buena, / Os diga la buena dicha / Dadme la mano sagrada / cara de Pascoa Florida"* (allow, Thee heavenly boy, / this humble Gypsy, / to enjoy good fortune, / may tell Thee the good fortune / give me Thy holy hand / face of Easter of Flowers), followed by the divination in the story, ending in a Gypsy dance, with the song: "*A la dina, dina / A la dana, dina / Que ay una Gitana, / Que verdades diga"* (A la dina, dina / A la dana, dina / there is a Gypsy woman, / who tells the truth).

Soror Violante do Céu (1602-1693), who at the time was called "the tenth muse", was not only one of the best Portuguese poetic voices of the seventeenth century but also a truly important and famous character in Portuguese society throughout her entire life. She wrote poems for the entry of Philip III in Portugal and many others to King D. João IV, after the restoration of Portuguese independence in 1640. She was a distinguished musician, spoke the classical languages perfectly and animated both the religious and courtly life in Lisbon. This *vilhancico* was not published until long after her death, in a collection of her poetry issued in Lisbon in 1733,[32] but most likely the poem circulated widely long before its publication. *Vilhancicos* were small theatrical compositions in verse intended to be sung and danced, integrated into a religious festival, Christmas, Easter, or a saint's day. They were extremely common in Portugal throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and often circulated in handwritten papers or published in fliers or small printed pamphlets. Essentially popular (the name derives from *vilão*, a villain), they were, according to Mendes dos Remédios "a show for the eyes and the ears",[33] but most of them were eventually lost or simply never written down. Among those which disappeared was a collection by the organist and composer Pedro Sanches de Paredes, a contemporary of Josefa and a beneficiary of the church of Óbidos, which is known to have inherited his collection of *vilhancico* manuscripts. Mendes dos Remédios, who studied the existing collections of this theatrical poetry, noted the abundant presence in such performances of somewhat marginal folk types in society, such as shepherds, black persons or Gypsies; whose appearances on stage, with unusual manners of speech, greatly amused audiences. Gypsy groups were used to introduce the dances and the episode of reading the Fate of Jesus seems to have been a recurring theme in them. One of the examples referred by Mendes dos Remédios on one such danced compositions shows the popularity of the theme painted by Josefa de Ayala:

"*Buena dicha, Niño hermozo,*
Promete beleza tanta,
Pues contra la muerte eterna
Tendrás tu vida larga.
Buena dicha te prometo.
Pues serás Niño de plata,
Gran Propheta de las letras,
Gran Capitan de las armas.
Que buena vá la dicha
Que buena vá la dança
Que blanda vá, la fiesta!
Que bella vá, la farça!
Buena dicha galanito,
Que en el semblante señalas,
Que es tu Padre un Padre eterno,
Y tu Madre una Muchacha."

('Good fortune, handsome Child,
Promise of so much beauty,
For against eternal death
Thou shalt live a long life.
Good fortune I promise Thee.
Thou will be a Child of silver,
Great Prophet of Letters,
Great Captain of arms.
Such is the good fortune
Such is the good dance
Soft is the merriment!
Beautiful is the farce!
Good fortune oh handsome One,
As shown in Thy countenance,
Thy Father is eternal,
And Thy Mother a young girl')[34]

As may be seen, in Josefa's time, this unusual visual theme was deeply rooted both in the erudite and folk religious culture. It was up to the painter to transform it, with the delicacy that her works always show, into one of her most beautiful creations that remained forgotten until very recently.






NOTES

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5. *Exposição de Pinturas de Josefa de Óbidos*, Lisbon: Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, 1949.
6. Miguel Torga, *Diário, V-VIII*, Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 1995, p. 23.
7. *Josefa na Ogiva.* Óbidos: Galeria Ogiva, 1971.
8. Reynaldo dos Santos, *Conferências de Arte.* Lisbon, 1943, p. 50.
9. Reynaldo dos Santos, "A pintura da segunda metade do século XVI ao final do século XVII" in *Arte Portuguesa – Pintura,* Lisbon: Excelsior 1953, p. 312. "Capeleira" was the name of the farm near Óbidos that belonged to Josefa's father and eventually to the painter herself.
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14. Vitor Serrão (coord.), *Josefa de Óbidos e o Tempo Barroco*, Lisbon: Galeria de Pintura do Rei D. Luís. IPPAR,1991. Cat. Nº 26.
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21. Fernando Benito Doménech, *Pintura y pintores en el Real Colegio de Corpus Christi*, Valencia, 1980, p. 188.
22. See the catalog *El Divino Morales*, edition by Leticia Ruiz Gómez, Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2015, especially p. 99 et seq.
23. Ana Ávila, "La Virgen com el Niño o La Virgen vestida de Gitana" in *El Divino Morales*, p. 99-100.
24. A. Romero Dorado, "Virgen del Sombrero ó Virgen Gitana", Catálogo de la Colección de Bienes Muebles de la Fundación Casa Medina Sidonia, Cádiz: Diputación de Cádiz, 2018, pp. 23-26.
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33. Mendes dos Remédios, *Os Vilhancicos. Breve estudo Bibliográfico-crítico dum género literário qe desapareceu há duzentos anos,* Coimbra: Lumen, 1923, p. 21.
34. Mendes dos Remédios, Op. Cit., p. 46. The author does not specify the *vilhancico* where this song is contained.











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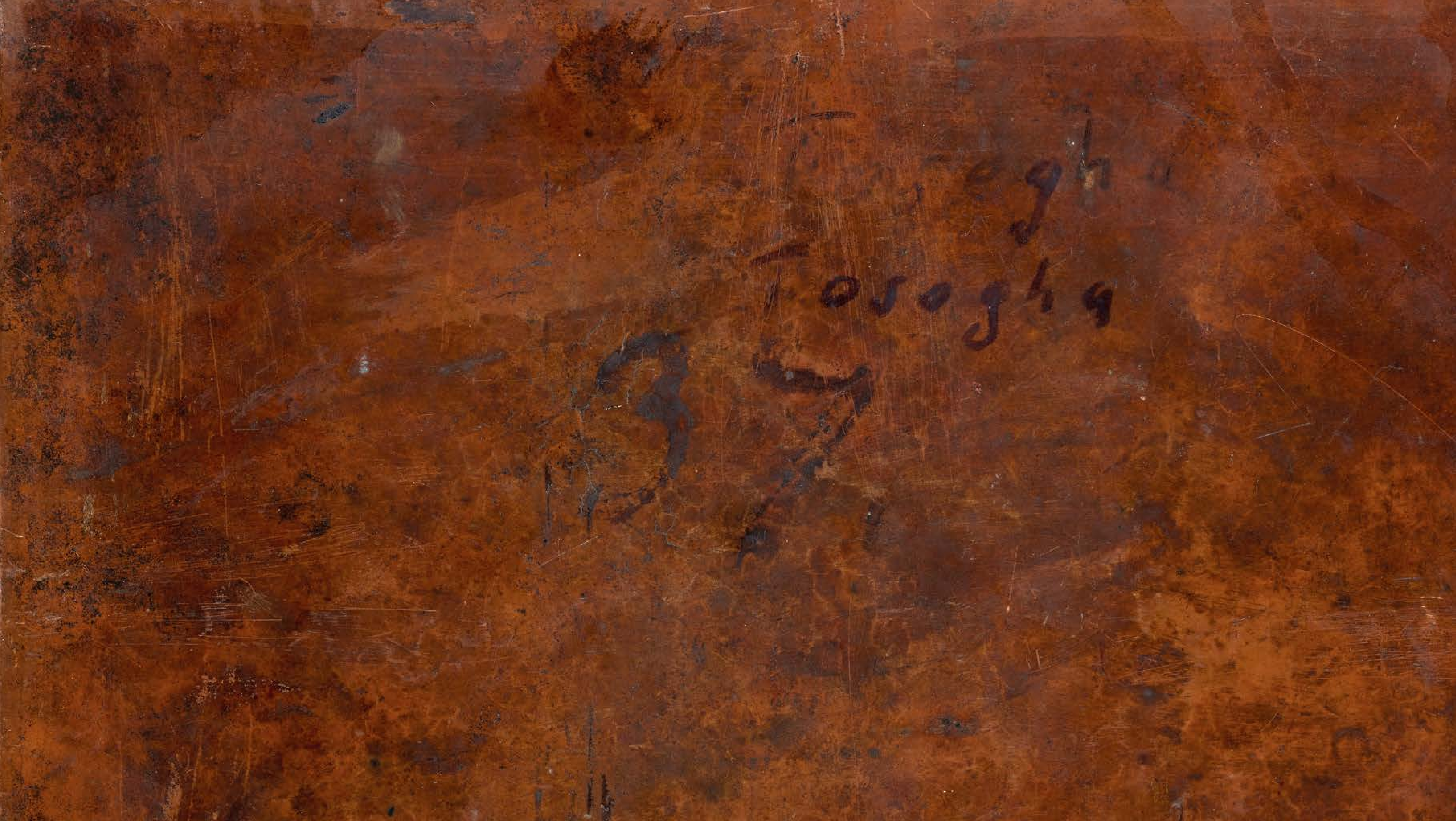
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Josefa de Ayala, *Reading the Fate of the Christ Child*, back of the painting.

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